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## STUDIO VISIT

### In the Studio With Ilana Savdie, the Artist Testing the Body's Limits

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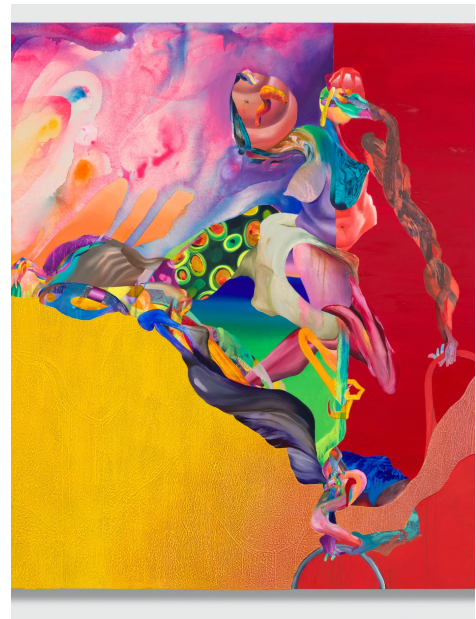
Ilana Savdie's paintings have become so electrifying over the past few years that recently, they sent her body into revolt. "The other day, I felt like my eyes were vibrating color," the Colombian artist tells me when I drop by her sun-drenched studio in Bushwick, Brooklyn on a recent afternoon. "And then, my contact lens popped out. It was like, *I'm done—I'm done looking*. So I abandoned ship."

The works that prompted such a visceral response have since made their way to White Cube's Bermondsey, London outpost; Savdie's first exhibition with the gallery, titled "In Jest," opens later this week. But all it takes is one canvas for me to see why the 36-year-old's corneas were almost at their breaking point: Savdie's bold hues are irresistibly eye-catching and alluring. Her goal is for her paintings to seduce; then, to repulse. If a closer look at the wrinkly texture of the beeswax that surrounds her amorphous figures feels beautifully grotesque, then Savdie's work is done.

Savdie did her very best to resist becoming an artist—and above all, a painter, the dream career that had always felt too impractical to pursue. So when it came time to enroll in university, she made a compromise with herself—she would go to art school, but only if her degree wasn't in the medium that had consumed her practically since she took her first steps. She went with illustration, and gainfully employed in the years following her graduation from the Rhode Island School of Design in 2008. Gigs like graphic design and retouching for beauty brands like Maybelline may have fulfilled her goal of not having to worry about making rent, but they were also demoralizing. "I remember feeling like something within me cracked," she recalls of poring over stock images and retouching photos of models to the point of oblivion. The task of "purifying" images came to feel so toxic, she became consumed with the impulse to distort and destroy. Painting full-time started feeling less like an itch she couldn't scratch and more like a festering wound.



Ilana Savdie, *Mamita, mamita rica y apretadita*.  
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube.



Ilana Savdie, *The Mouth Briefly Shut Itself*.  
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube.

So, after working from nine to five, Savdie would spend five to nine experimenting with different kinds of painting, trying to sort out what felt right. A decade after earning her undergraduate degree, she enrolled in the Yale School of Art. She completed her MFA in 2018, and by the time she finished a year-long fellowship at NXTHVN, the residency founded by the artists Titus Kaphar, Jason Price, and Jonathan Brand, she knew exactly what she wanted to explore: perversion, identity, and the confines and expanses of the human body. Her first prominent solo exhibition, at Kohn Gallery in Los Angeles, quickly earned her comparisons to Helen Frankenthaler, the influential Color Field painter whose abstract paintings were also deeply saturated in bold hues.



Ilana Savdie, *La Llorona, por detrás*, 2022.

Photo by Mara Corsino

Savdie grew up in Barranquilla, Colombia, home of the world's second-largest carnival. Her mother is from Venezuela and her father was born and raised in Egypt. She later moved to Miami, but the riot of colors found at the annual celebration of traditional Colombian folklore, which consists largely of street parades and performances, remains a lasting influence. It was only upon moving to Brooklyn that Savdie felt comfortable embracing her sexuality, and in doing so, she realized the bold hues defining her palette are the same found at some of the queer spaces she frequents in Bushwick. "There's an overlap, and I don't think it's an accident that my brain has amalgamated all of that," she says. The more she thought about it, the more she began to consider that maybe

carnaval and queer cultures weren't so dissimilar. Is dressing up in flamboyant costumes really so different from dressing in drag? Savdie is fascinated with the concept of performance—the way it allows one to try multiple identities on for size. To her, the humanoid figures that populate her paintings are “bodies performing as... whatever they're performing.”

Routines are hard for Savdie; the only reason she consistently arrives at her studio by 8:30 AM is that she needs to find parking before rush hour. She starts out making sketches, some of which later turn into works on paper. She scans and manipulates them on Photoshop to play around with how to adapt them for the canvas, then uses tape to map out where to place the materials that currently define her practice: paint and beeswax, which she melts down in a crock pot. She applies both with a pouring technique, guiding the liquids into their allotted sections while allowing them to travel organically across the canvas. It's a complicated dance that Savdie is still trying to master—when you consider the fact that the floor in her workspace is uneven, it's not hard to see why she describes the process as a “power struggle.” The last step of what's formally known as encaustic painting is to smooth the beeswax, but Savdie doesn't interfere with it after she does a pour; she lets the wax dry organically, creating a texture that resembles heavily wrinkled skin.





The meaning behind the title of Savdie's White Cube showing, "In Jest," is twofold. Savdie has long been drawn to the *marimonda*, the carnival character that's Colombia's version of a jester. The unmistakably phallic mask that participants wear to embody it is a motif that occasionally pops up in her work, as are parasites—specifically, the type that is ingested—thus the play on words with the exhibition's title. The tropically transmitted organisms are another way in which Savdie has been exploring the concept of bodily autonomy: If a person loses their agency, where does their body begin and where does it end? "I've been thinking a lot about boundaries and what it means to spill out of them," she says. "I'm always going to be bigger than the space allotted for me, and embracing that is liberating. It feels honest—and the work has to be honest."

